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# Conflicting or Complimentary? The Varying Approaches to Humanitarian Action

Andre Patzke  
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Conflicting or Complimentary?  
The Varying Approaches to Humanitarian Action

By  
Andre Patzke

## **ABSTRACT**

In the international humanitarian aid community (IHAC), a group of national, political, public, and private actors, there are many dichotomies. These differences range from the organizations' structures to their humanitarian philosophies. One philosophical schism amongst the IHAC actors is the seemingly contradictory approaches of the UN's cluster system and that of the Dunantist organizations. In general, this schism can be characterized as a contrast in humanitarian ideologies; the integrated approach, which includes political development, on the one hand, and strict humanitarian aid that stays removed from issues of development on the other.

It was not the focus of my research to debate the validity of these two approaches, or to argue that one is favorable to the other. Instead, this study examines whether or not these approaches can coexist in a beneficial manner. That is to say, does the schism in the approach to humanitarian action have a negative, positive, or negligible impact on the ability of the IHAC to deliver resources to those in need on the ground? After examining the various IHAC actors, multiple humanitarian approaches, and several field cases, this report will demonstrate how the integrated and strict approaches' simultaneous and separate existence from each other helps to balance and improve the entire IHAC's ability to provide assistance in many more ways and in many more contexts.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Resolution 46/182 from December 1991 states, “Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality” [1991, GAR]. These principles have been widely accepted as essential components of providing humanitarian assistance. However, the same resolution goes on to state, “emergency assistance should be provided in ways that will be supportive of recovery and long-term development” [1991, GAR]. Thus, humanitarian branches of the UN, along with their implanting partners, have embraced an approach to humanitarian action that integrates considerations for future development with early recovery assistance immediate aid in humanitarian crises. This combination of development (which can be politically biased) with humanitarian aid (which includes the principle of impartiality) is the basis for a major rift within the humanitarian community. As one employee of Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) pointed out, “focusing on development can be contradictory to the delivery of humanitarian aid” [MSF Interview 2010]. Thus, organizations such as MSF and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) emphasize the importance of strictly adhering to the humanitarian principles and separating humanitarianism from development.

Before this program and this project I was admittedly ignorant of the mechanisms that make humanitarian action possible on a global scale. As my knowledge of this topic increased and I progressed through my research I became increasingly interested in the paradoxical approaches of the UN and Dunantist NGOs (most notably MSF and the ICRC). On one hand there is the UN’s cluster system, implemented in 2005, which epitomizes the integration of humanitarian action development. Created in order to improve the international humanitarian aid community’s (IHAC) coordination and leadership on broad issues (such as water and sanitation) in humanitarian situations, the cluster system attempts to pull all IHAC actors together, which include the UN, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement (to a limited extent), and NGOs. On the other hand there are MSF and the ICRC, which remain outside the system. By remaining independent, these organizations claim to be more able to more fully perform their humanitarian imperative. I began to wonder if these ‘external’ players actually undermine the UN’s integrated approach by not participating in it? Or, more broadly and importantly, if the contrasting humanitarian approaches of the UN (integrated) and the Dunantists’ (strict) decreased the ability of the IHAC to support those in need?

## **METHODOLOGY**

I approached this project by consulting a wide variety of sources. First, I was privy to a variety of lectures from many healthcare actors in the Geneva area. These provided a broad context from which I based the rest of my research. Second, I used a combination of a variety of written works that included a collection of scholarly articles, reports from the UN, and reports from NGOs to demonstrate a variety of opinions on various aspects of humanitarian action. Third, I conducted a series of interviews with employees of organizations with varying humanitarian ideologies. I sought a variety of opinions and ideas and analyzed the information learned by identifying themes and grouping similar ideologies so as to demonstrate similarities and differences between approaches.

I will establish why and how the integrated approach and the strict/impartial approach compliment each other. My report will first examine the various actors in the IHAC in terms of their structures, procedures, policies, goals, priorities, and mechanisms. Second, it will examine the varying approaches in terms of their ideological basis, criticisms, and approaches. Third, I will introduce the case studies of Afghanistan and Haiti as examples of how both approaches can be beneficial. Fourth, I will examine some situations where the separation between each approach is blurred by concern over possible negative consequences of humanitarian action. Finally, I will briefly summarize and offere my reflection on what I will take away from this experience.

## **RESULTS**

### **The IHAC Actors**

The main descriptor and one of the strengths of the IHAC is its diversity. The community is comprised of three main groups: the UN, the Red Cross/Crescent movement, and NGOs. Though there are further layers of diversity, niches, and off-shoots within each group that further complicate any analysis of the IHAC, there are broad themes in terms of policies, procedures, structure, goals, and priorities that help demonstrate the difficulty posed by coordination. Therefore, this section will focus on the general similarities within each group of IHAC actors.

## The UN

In general, the UN system is composed of several semiautonomous organizations that seek to support the overall consensus of the global, political community. The four UN organizations that have emerged as important players in most humanitarian emergencies are the World Food Program (WFP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) [Natsios 1995]. The level of deviation amongst IHAC actors becomes clear when considering the varying mandates of these organizations in relation to humanitarian aid (from food to development). However, these 'big four,' as UN organizations, share certain characteristics that typify the UN system.

The most important aspect of the UN's humanitarian organizations is their tendency to focus their attention on governments. This is logical considering the UN is a forum of governments. As a forum, the UN is a hierarchical bureaucracy. This enables the UN to interact well with other governmental bureaucracies, which are the UN and its agencies' primary constituents. Because states are the UN's primary constituency, the big four's priority in humanitarian emergencies is to assist the state. The UN organizations "judge success by whether the host governments are pleased" [Natsios 1995]. In other words, the goal of UN agencies in humanitarian aid is to assist states.

Focusing on state governments influences the structure and general policy of UN agencies' relief programs. For instance, most UN aid is channeled through the host governments. Also, the big four are not heavily involved in 'grassroots' programs (programs that deliver aid directly to people) [Natsios 1995]. The UN must cultivate cordial relations with local policy makers and political elites in order to ensure the host state's compliance with the implementation of aid/support given. Similarly, the UN is reluctant to violate the sovereignty of a host state or to criticize a member state publicly [1991 GAR 46/182].

Based on the UN's state oriented approach, the creation of the cluster system reflects the organization's opinion that "better global governance" is synonymous with *more* global governance [Annan, 2000]. In addition, the UN also views itself as maintaining a 'central' and 'unique role' to provide leadership within the IHAC community [1991 GAR 46/182]. Combined, these two organizational beliefs form the basis for why the UN sees the cluster system as essential to improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response; by creating a bureaucratic



system that places the UN in the center of the IHAC community, the UN is fulfilling its self-proclaimed mandate to lead through global governance. Therefore, the aspects of the UN that lead it to prefer a state-centered, integrated, developmental approach include its connection to public governments, reliance on and trust in bureaucracy, and the UN's belief in its own importance as a central player.

## NGOs

In contrast to the UN, which can properly be described as representing the public sector, the NGO community has been described as representing the private sector. However, since the implementation of the cluster system, this description of NGOs is becoming less true. This is because many NGOs are now working as implementing partners of the UN cluster system. However, each NGO's culture, history, aims, and structure are unique. In this way, the NGO community is much more diverse than those that operate under the UN umbrella. In fact, some NGOs define much of their existence by being outside the UN system.

The most important factor that differentiates those NGOs that implement UN programs and those that prefer to stay separate is funding. The large international NGOs that are able to raise funds from private donors and can afford to stay separate from the UN and its cluster system. On the other hand, the smaller national NGOs that do not have the resources or notoriety to attract sufficient donations must rely on receiving projects and handouts from the UN and its affiliates. Because international NGOs have the ability to support themselves financially, they are able to maintain an operational autonomy that they would otherwise not be able to.

Additionally, national NGOs tend to respond to humanitarian needs within their own region and are often involved well after the initial relief surge. International NGOs, in contrast, respond to various crises around the world and are usually less committed to any specific area for the long-term (though, in practice, this may be becoming less true across the board, most continue to maintain the goal of short-term interventions). While the larger NGOs address an international assortment of short-term interventions, national NGOs have stronger ties to a specific region and are more invested in the long-term status. Development (with or without UN guidance) is a higher priority for national NGOs than it is for their international counterparts because of the two groups differing foci; national NGOs are concerned with the region, international NGOs derive their imperative from the type of intervention.

NGOs shape their programs to fit the interests of their constituency: public and private donors. In practical terms, this translates into most NGO funding being directly implemented at the field level. Because donors want to see the impact of their investment, minimal funds are used for research or surveillance of programs. NGOs, instead, prefer to invest as much as possible in tangible relief efforts. Thus, NGOs tend to be more operationally focused than the UN or Red Cross movement. In other words, these organizations want to translate their funding into as much work on the ground as is possible. These ‘grassroots’ programs and approaches are very popular among donors, including the UN, who like to see the “impact” of their donations. However, this approach to local action can create coordination issues amongst overlapping (or ignored) objectives, tasks, and areas of responsibility [Natsios 1995]. Therefore the UN has sought to organize these issues by absorbing many NGOs within the cluster system; whether or not an organization decides to join the system is dependent on its financial autonomy, their operational imperative, scale of focus, and the value they place in independence.

#### The Red Cross/Crescent Movement

In his analysis of the humanitarian community, Andrew Natsios calls the Red Cross Movement (RCM) the “most disciplined, and best organized of the three sets of actors of the international relief response system” [Natsios 1995]. As the only humanitarian organization with a mandate under international law, the RCM is an “international organization, not an NGO, and yet it is outside the UN system” [Natsios 1995]. Structurally, the RCM has two major sub categories: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). Together, the IFRC (who works in areas following natural or manmade disasters), and the ICRC (whose mandate is mainly focused on the assistance of victims of war) combine to provide assistance in almost every major humanitarian situation imaginable.

The IFRC states that its *raison d'être* is “to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity” [ICRC-History]. The IFRC seeks to accomplish this mandate through a global network of national societies in 186 countries. Though not part of the public sphere, the IFRC works closely with local governments and is committed to regions for long periods of time. This type of intervention demonstrates the difference between the IFRC and the ICRC which fiercely guards its autonomy and independence, while the IFRC has been

much more open to collaboration with the UN, including its role as a cluster lead in some situations.

The goals of the IFRC are to reduce the impacts of disasters and health emergencies, increase capacity to address emergencies, and to promote tolerance. Therefore, the broad aims of the IFRC are similar to the UN umbrella compared to the much more specific aims of individual NGOs. However, the IFRC is more like NGOs and less like the UN in that each national office is unique and autonomous, instead of being governed by an international body. Further, national offices of the IFRC are dependent on both private and public funding. Because some offices are not as stable financially as others, some may choose to work closer with the UN than others, including petitioning the UN for funding [ICRC Interview 2010]. The goal is for each national office to be able to implement programs in each context. While collaboration with the Red Cross supplies the UN and the cluster system with necessary expertise, legitimacy and a popular brand, IFRC offices are able to sustain themselves financially.

The ICRC, prefers to separate itself from the UN. Its reasons for doing so arise from the organization's role in conflict. As a group that attempts to operate within, between, and among opposing parties in conflict, the ICRC does not want its organization to be associated with any political agenda which may be attached to the UN and its affiliates (for example, being pro-western). Further, the ICRC, like the UN, is funded by international grants and has much more freedom than many national offices of the IFRC. For the Red Cross movement at large, whether the various organizations will be involved in the cluster system tends to be determined by each group's operational imperative, modus operandi, and financial freedom.

#### Determining the actors' factors of integration

As can be seen above, each actor in the IHAC bases their involvement or non-involvement with the cluster system on a set of unique criteria. Simultaneously, there are themes that unite the various actors and one can outline trends that influence an associations' decision to operate within the cluster system or not.

For the UN, the cluster system is based on its belief that it is a central player in the IHAC. For other organizations, the decision to operate under the UN's directions is based on factors such as financial autonomy, modus operandi, and scale of focus. In general, those actors that struggle to raise independent funding, operate less frequently in regions of conflict, and have a

specific area of focus or expertise in humanitarian aid are more likely to cooperate with the cluster system. In contrast, organizations that are capable of large funding campaigns, are concerned with being associated with political biases, and oversee a broad range in types and areas of intervention, are more likely to guard their independence. These factors not only determine an organization's willingness to work in the cluster system, they help shape an organization's approach to humanitarian action.

## **The Approaches**

The IHAC is divided into two general approaches to the delivery of humanitarian aid. First, the integrated approach – represented best by the UN and its affiliates in the cluster system – attempts to blend immediate recovery with long-term development. Second, the strict humanitarian approach – represented by the ICRC and MSF – focuses on the short-term delivery of humanitarian aid. Understanding the ideological arguments for each approach, their mechanisms, benefits, and limitations will help establish the basis for how these approaches operate in tandem.

### **The Integrated Approach – basis and mechanisms**

As previously stated, the cluster system is the central mechanism of the integrated approach. A so-called “clustering” of humanitarian aid organizations in order to supplement the coordination of internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps was one of several recommendations for humanitarian reform made in the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) of 2005. Though clustering was the first humanitarian reform to be implemented by the UN, the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has since decided to expand clusters far beyond their original focus of “gap-filling” in response to IDPs to include every aspect of recovery in humanitarian action. Today, the cluster system is the most important mechanism in any humanitarian response venture [Action Aid International 2006].

The HRR sought to expose, explain, and provide solutions for weaknesses in the IHAC that led to a slow and inadequate response in Darfur, Sudan in 2004. The review identified a lack of a “global vision,” leadership in IDP camps, mechanisms for accountability and measurement, and a particular lack of sectoral capacities and inadequate preparedness as the main failures of the IHAC in responding to crises. Further, the review stated a need to reconcile “sometimes

contradicting imperatives” among actors, that a “global vision is lacking,” and that the “time has come for cooperation [among IHAC actors],” though it did not suggest that the cluster idea should be implemented for anything beyond supplying coordination and leadership for IDP camps [Adinolfi 2005].

The “pillars” of humanitarian reforms that were implemented as a result of the HRR include the creation of expanded clusters, strengthening of the humanitarian coordination system, creation of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), and so-called “relations between the UN and NGOs” [ICVA 2006]. The reforms implemented by the UN are mainly focused on increased coordination amongst IHAC actors. As one employee at the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) put it, the “task is to try to coordinate those views and perspectives [of the IHAC community] to try to come up with some sort of single coherent response; and that is partially what the cluster system and the whole humanitarian agenda was trying to do, to increase the accountability, predictability, and responsibility of those agencies working together in a slightly more defined direction” [OCHA Interview 2010].

So what else was the humanitarian agenda attempting to accomplish? The most important element of the evolution of humanitarian action, which has now been structurally implemented by the cluster system, is the recognition of the importance of long-term effects. “There is far more recognition that the work you do in humanitarian actions must... do no harm for the future,” the OCHA representative explained. “Which means you have to take into account what’s going on in the underlying development context of the country when you are implementing your humanitarian response to make sure you are not undermining development or creating a problem for the future” [OCHA Interview 2010]. This focus on the future, which includes the goal of a seamless transition from recovery to development, also tries to recognize how humanitarian action of certain types and at certain times can have detrimental affects on the current or future situation (possibly a conflict) on the ground. This approach takes into account the political impact of humanitarian aid instead of assuming that humanitarian intervention is always justified.

The most consequential mechanisms of the cluster system are their implementation of leadership and funding, which directly influence incentives. There are three ‘types’ of clusters: service provision, relief, and assistance [ICVA 2006]. Within those categories, clusters were created in areas such as food and nutrition, water and sanitation, logistics, security, and education

among others. Each cluster is headed by a lead agency that is accountable as the “port of first call,” and “provider of last resort” [Action Aid International 2006]. By providing leadership and a forum for agencies to discuss issues that cover broad themes, the cluster approach hopes to ‘fill the gaps’ in broad issues that require holistic approaches and that crosscut humanitarian programs. This means that implementing agencies in clusters work together to achieve the goals established by their leads, essentially surrendering some organizational autonomy.

The UN’s implementing partners in the cluster system are willing to surrender this autonomy because of the possible financial benefit or visa versa. As the contact at OCHA explained, “The original intention of having some power over funding, or over some money at the country level when the initial HR discussions took place was that the HC (Humanitarian Coordinator) had no stick and no carrot to improve coordination” [OCHA Interview 2010]. Thus, funding is used in the cluster system as a tool to promote the compliance of NGOs with the cluster leads.

#### The Strict Humanitarian Approach – basis and mechanisms

Strict humanitarianism finds its philosophical basis in the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality. These philosophical principles, along with operational realities in the field that differ from those organizations that subscribe to the integrated approach, are the foundation for arguments in support of strict humanitarianism. In terms of the implementation of the strict approach, the most important aspects are independence and focus on short-term intervention. Two of the best examples of organizations that adhere to the strict humanitarian approach are MSF and the ICRC.

When asked to describe the role of humanitarian action, one MSF employee responded, “The role is not to provide health for everyone. We do not try to prevent, we try to respond to needs. We just work on the consequences...” [MSF Interview, 2010]. Such a description underscores a few important beliefs of the MSF community. First, MSF is committed to limited intervention. As one employee from another organization described, the MSF approach can be equated to acting as medical “paratroopers,” first responders that supply basic health care in a fast, yet finite fashion. As this suggests, MSF does not view development as part of its imperative. “We must be humble enough to just respond,” the MSF employee continued [MSF

Interview, 2010]. Why does MSF feel it must only respond? That brings us to a second belief of the MSF community.

In the above context, the terms ‘limited’ and ‘finite’ refer to the type of intervention by MSF: providing medical assistance and ‘bearing witness,’ not the range of intervention. By contrast, a second important belief of MSF is that it should seek to deliver assistance to those who are in need regardless of race, religion, or political affiliation [About Us: History and Principles, 2010]. By combining these two beliefs, we can summarize the humanitarian philosophy of MSF can be summarized as providing medical assistance to those who are in need regardless of political factors.

In order to achieve the goals of this simple, yet problematic philosophy MSF must operate in a wide range of contexts. TO ensure the organization may provide assistance in various contexts, MSF has adopted a very strict code of independence. One could aptly describe its code of independence as its attempt to remain non-politicized. By remaining ‘above’ political discourse, MSF hopes that it will be able to work amongst all political actors regardless of their leaning. In essence, MSF views neutrality as central to the fulfillment of its humanitarian philosophy.

Neutrality is equally essential to the imperative of the ICRC. Because the ICRC works in areas of conflict, on both sides and in between the conflict, the organization must constantly assert its role as an independent an organization with no political agenda. “For the ICRC, in all contexts where we work, we are a neutral, independent humanitarian actor... for us, it is really important in the field because it has direct implications in terms of access.” [ICRC Interview, 2010]. In this regard, the ICRC approach is very similar to the MSF approach; the main differences between the organizations’ approaches are that the ICRC focuses on victims of armed conflict and does pursue public advocacy in the same way that MSF does. The basis of strict humanitarianism is independence and neutrality, which allows organizations such as the ICRC and MSF to operate in various political contexts.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of the approaches**

Both the integrated and strict approaches to humanitarian action present certain positives as well as some negatives or limits to that approach. We must understand where the borders of

each approach are so that we can understand how the two interact, overlap, inhibit, or supplement each other.

### The Integrated Approach

The integrated approach focuses on the inclusion of many actors, and recognizes “that different actors play very different parts in an emergency response, and all of those parts have actual value” [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Thus, the approach of the cluster system is a holistic approach that attempts to address problems from a variety of angles. In this regard, the integrated approach is humanitarian action on steroids, offering more than the medical assistance of the strict approach. This includes more than the immediate recover, but also future development. By involving actors, local or international, who are concerned with the future development of a region the integrated approach decreases the potential of humanitarian action doing more harm than good and addresses multiple needs with one effort.

A second benefit of the integrated approach is coordination, which was the basis for the formation of the cluster system. Both the MSF and the ICRC recognize that coordination amongst the variety of IHAC actors as an essential development. To quote an employee of the ICRC, “There is a role for the cluster system, you need some sort of coordination” [ICRC Interview, 2010]. Or, as an employee from OCHA put it, “I don't think anyone denies that you do need to coordinate, that you don't want to duplicate efforts, or that people do want to get something positive out of coordination, NGO or UN” [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Further, the benefits of coordination include factors such as limited overlap, efficiency, gap elimination, and a concentrated means of addressing humanitarian needs.

Despite its benefits, the integrated approach has several weaknesses. As mentioned above, the goal of creating the modern cluster system was to improve accountability, predictability, and reliability in the IHAC. There are, however, some serious concerns over whether or not clusters are capable of promoting such goals, or even worsen them. Questions that are raised about clusters fall in two main categories: theoretical and structural. While internal UN reviews have focused on clusters’ initial structural flaws in their initial implementation, external reviews from NGOs and third party experts have also found fault in the philosophical basis for clusters. Ultimately, the variety of critiques of the cluster system resembles the diversity in the IHAC.

One concern that has been raised against clusters, conveniently, is its impact on the diversity of actors. As the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) simply states, “Diversity in the



humanitarian sector is a strength” [Egeland 2006]. If diversity is viewed as a quality superior to consensus in the IHAC, the pursuit of consensus amongst cluster implementers could be considered a negative. Further, themes found in the cluster system, such as the promotion of a ‘global vision,’ could be misconstrued as being anti-diversity. While the UN must balance diversity with the goal of ‘predictability,’ organizations such as MSF are less than concerned with how the cluster system could limit the ‘complimentarity’ and scope of responses [Derderian 2007]. When asked if he was worried about the cluster’s negative impact on the diversity of actors, one MSF employee responded simply, “No. We can look at Haiti. In the Health Cluster there are over 160 actors” [MSF Interview, 2010]. Therefore, instead of the health cluster limiting diversity, perhaps it encourages it by supplying a framework of access for NGOs.

However, by becoming part of framework that is headed by the UN, NGOs surrender some autonomy, impartiality and neutrality. According to MSF, because the cluster system is a UN mechanism, it is not neutral. Despite the UN’s own profession of impartiality, MSF states that there is a perception in many areas that the UN pushes a “pro-western agenda” [Derderian 2007]. Evidence can be found to support this claim in several instances, most notably in Afghanistan where the UN has openly supported the Karzai regime and the American forces. By association, any organization linked to the UN can therefore not provide assistance to those in areas controlled by the Taliban. For further evidence, MSF points to the 2006 riots in Guiglo, Ivory Coast where “UN and NGO offices were looted and damaged, but MSF was unmolested, and MSF and the ICRC restarted their activities the day after the unrest” [Derderian 2007]. For MSF, such an example demonstrates how the cluster system can damage the effectiveness of aid through its impact on perception and neutrality. As MSF states, “perception is fragile, and crucial to humanitarian access and security” [Derderian 2007]. Therefore, a major limitation of the integrated approach is the limited access due to the safety and political concerns resulting from association with a pro-western agenda.

A further concern that has been raised against the cluster system related to autonomy is its impact on incentives. In general, this concern results from the unanticipated impact that cluster system has had on funding and donor patterns. Specifically, donors have begun to channel their funds through clusters at large, finding it easier on their end to give in large, lump sums. This is a break from the past when more funding was given directly to NGOs. This trend is potentially problematic due to its impact on the timeliness and fairness of funding. In addition, even though

competition for resources amongst NGOs has always existed, the centralization of funds within the hands of cluster-leading organizations alters the nature of competition amongst NGOs. As an MSF put it, by channeling funds through UN mechanisms, NGOs must “knock at the door of the UN agencies... begging for funds. And they take the money that is available and not according to the needs” [MSF Interview, 2010]. Thus, humanitarian action takes place where there is sufficient funding, in contrast to sufficient funding being raised to support humanitarian action where there are needs.

Briefly mentioned in the proceeding paragraph, increased bureaucratization is a third critique of the integrated approach. It is inevitable that when attempting coordination on a massive scale that the scale of bureaucratic procedures will expand. Specifically, bureaucracy is needed to regulate aspects of management such as funding. As my contact at MSF worries, “The UN is playing an intermediary role, which means one layer of bureaucracy added to an already bureaucratic system” [MSF Interview, 2010]. Additionally, there is a concern that NGOs may begin to mimic the UN structurally in order to work more effectively along side of it. As Smith and Weiss point out, organizations prefer to work with other organizations that are similarly structured [Smith 1997]. Elizabeth Ferris also argues that, “As [NGOs] grow and become more professional, they also run the risk of becoming increasingly similar to UN agencies” [Ferris 2007]. As the employee of MSF stated, “To say that we are becoming like the UN is the worst qualification that you can give to MSF” [MSF Interview, 2010]. This fear results from bureaucracy being synonymous with red tape, delays, politicization and being disconnected from the situation on the ground.

While organizations prescribing to the integrated approach may view expanded bureaucracy as a necessary evil to ensure coordination, many have voiced fears of its impact on the ground. “In Somalia,” the MSF report on humanitarian reforms explains, “despite increased coordination meetings and a greater willingness to share information, cluster output is negligible” [Derderian 2007]. In more general terms, Andrew Natsios points to how “more organizational entities involved in a decision-making process [can lead to] more opportunit[ies] for delay, if not paralysis” [Natsios 1995]. Kerstin Martens agrees, stating that increased professionalisation and bureaucratisation can cause NGOs to “lose their flexibility and ability to give quick responses” [Martens 2001]. When one considers these criticisms of bureaucracy in conjunction with the goals of the cluster system (including speed and predictability), one must

question the UN's tendency to equate 'better governance' with *more* governance in the humanitarian aid arena.

The final consequence of the cluster's alteration of donor preferences is an impact on oversight and organizational accountability. As described above, NGOs were previously accountable to their private donors. These donors wanted to see the impact of their funding at the ground level. Therefore, while NGOs developed as implementers of grassroots projects, donors maintained oversight capacities in order to ensure their money was producing the most impact it could. With the shift in donations from NGOs to clusters, oversight has shifted from donors to clusters [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Therefore, NGOs are now accountable to the UN rather than private donors. Though MSF has raised questions about "whether NGOs *should* be accountable to the UN system" [Derderian 2007], I believe that the standardization of oversight and accountability is a positive development in many cases because of the limitations of many donor groups' oversight capacities. If there are any tasks the UN is structured to perform well, they are administration, surveillance, and oversight.

In sum, the integrated approach, as it is expressed in the cluster system, includes several strengths as well as weaknesses. Specifically, the strengths of the integrated approach have been identified as being its holistic approach, consideration of future concerns, and the benefits of coordination (which includes the elimination of operational overlap, and gaps, improved efficiency, and a concentrated/focused means of addressing humanitarian needs). The concerns that have been raised over the approach are its limited access due to its politicization nature, its distortion of funding mechanisms, and its increased bureaucratization of humanitarian action.

For actors subscribing to the philosophy of strict humanitarianism, one weakness of the integrated approach jumps out: limited access. By definition, limited access is not an acceptable condition for strict humanitarians. This is because of their belief in the delivery of aid to all those who need it, regardless of their economic status. Therefore, strict humanitarians remove themselves from any political biases of the integrated approach. As stated earlier, the purpose of this is to allow movements such as MSF and ICRC to operate in regions of conflict or regions with complex political situations or conflicts. In practice this allows these organizations to supply populations with medical aid that the UN and its implementing partners cannot due to the safety or access concerns. Therefore, a central strength of strict humanitarianism is that it facilitates projects in just about any political situation, greatly increasing the flexibility and range of action.

A further positive in this regard is the promotion of multiple choices for those in need. As Smith and Weiss point out, “NGOs [may] consciously seek in their activities to be alternatives to those of governments” [Smith 1997]. Therefore, one benefit of those NGOs that choose to operate outside the cluster system is their ability to act as an alternative to the public sector, thereby increasing diversity in choice for donors (a sort of free market competition applied to humanitarian aid). Thus, by maintaining action that is an alternative to the cluster system, promoters of strict humanitarianism increase the variety and the range of aid; acting as a check to the cluster system which is probably best understood, or most sincerely felt, as financial.

The limits of the strict approach are its definition. By limiting itself to responsive medical assistance, the strict approach can potentially leave gaps. Again, this is not to suggest that one approach is better or preferable to the other. Instead, this is simply an attempt to demonstrate that, by not being addressing humanitarian action in a holistic manor, strict humanitarianism does not address the causes or elements related to the need for humanitarian intervention. While MSF certainly acknowledges this, it is a perfectly reasonable critique that the organization’s mentality as ‘paratroopers’ ignores many issues which could be addressed along side the delivery of immediate and life saving aid.

All in all, the benefits of strict humanitarianism boil down to the benefits of increased access due to organizational independence and neutrality, as well as its function as an alternative and check to the public sector’s integrated approach. The weaknesses of the strict approach are mainly its limited focus, leaving gaps in other areas that are directly or indirectly linked to humanitarian action. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of both the integrated and the strict approach, we can move to an examination of whether or not these approaches can supplement each other in the field.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Room for cooperation**

By now, I have attempted to establish several broad themes related to the implementation of both integrated and strict humanitarianism. Primarily, these themes relate to the positives and the negatives of each approach. Specifically, the strengths of the integrated approach are its broad focus, consideration of future impacts, and the benefits of coordination while its weaknesses are its limited range of action due to its politicization and its structural difficulties. The central strength of the strict approach is its ability to operate in varying political contexts

whiles its main weakness is its limited focus. By examining these themes in tandem, this section will demonstrate how the two approaches are complimentary.

First, I will examine the weaknesses of strict humanitarianism alongside the strengths of the integrated approach. As I have argued, the strict approach's limited focus fails to address many aspects related to the delivery of medical assistance, which could be addressed simultaneously. The best example of this is development. In reality, MSF has recognized that their interventions "cannot be detrimental to future development" [MSF Interview, 2010], and the ICRC tries to "have in mind how do we get out of this, or how does this help in the long term [when providing aid]" [ICRC Interview, 2010]. However, neither organization would enjoy being referred to as development organizations. Room remains for the transition from recovery to development; a transition that the ICRC stated was "crucial" in order to prevent leaving voids after interventions [ICRC Interview, 2010]. Additionally, an MSF employee offered, "The UN can play the role [of arbiter] between organizations that are more emergency oriented and those that are more development oriented" [MSF Interview, 2010]. Such a dialogue, he would go on to add, MSF concedes is necessary as well.

Even when organizations such as MSF "cannot accept working on a system that maybe could work at some point [in the future], while people are dying today" [MSF Interview, 2010], strict humanitarians have begun to recognize "you actually need [to include] an early recovery, or even a development approach [to humanitarian action]" [ICRC Interview, 2010]. As the need for transition from recovery to development is becoming a more and more accepted aspect of humanitarian action, there remains a need for the gap to be filled. The integrated approach and the cluster system seek to fill that gap; where the immediate recovery projects of MSF end, which are necessary and effective in their own right, the cluster system may facilitate the transition to sustainable recovery in order to mitigate harmful voids in aid. In this way, the short-term focus of strict humanitarians and the inclusion of long-term planning in the integrated approach complement each other.

At this point, it is important to reinforce that the preceding argument was intended to suggest that strict humanitarians should adopt a development imperative. This would, in fact, be counter-productive. As my contact at MSF argued, due to its political nature, "Focusing on development can be contradictory to immediate aid" [MSF Interview, 2010]. Which brings me to the main weakness of the integrated approach, its limited access due to its politicized nature. As

one OCHA employee admitted, “There are places where MSF or the ICRC can go that the UN cannot by virtue of being outside the mechanisms or taking a particular stance. They may also have a level of cooperation with the local population that, because the UN label, may be more difficult for some of the other organizations [to obtain]. However hard we try to work on the advocacy of humanitarian principles, impartiality and neutrality, [we] still are the UN, and you may not be able to get away from that” [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Or, as an MSF employee put it, “Their (the UN’s) vision is not necessarily bad. But at least, in such a context, it means they cannot provide assistance” [MSF Interview, 2010].

Therefore, there is a gap between the politicized approach of the cluster system, its integrated approach and those who are in need of humanitarian assistance but reside in areas that the clusters have no access to. This gap can be effectively filled by strict humanitarian organizations. While, as MSF points out, “To work on development in places where there is still a conflict may not be possible [because of political factors]” [MSF Interview, 2010], the needs of the people in those situations still need to be addressed. The ICRC, which goes “a long way to make sure we are seen as separate from the UN” [ICRC Interview, 2010], and MSF can step in and address the needs of those who the clusters cannot reach. Therefore, the strict approach’s ability to access people in need that the UN’s clusters cannot helps balance-out one of the major weaknesses of the integrated approach.

In sum, despite these two views on humanitarian action’s contradictory approaches, they – in effect – compliment each other very well. As detailed above, the strict approach’s limited focus is balanced by the integrated approach’s more broad focus, and the integrated approach’s weakness of limited access is balanced by the strict approach’s increased freedom. Further, it must be reinforced that these two philosophies cannot be blended. That is to say, it is impossible to combine the benefits of each approach. Instead, each approach is only beneficial as a unique entity, separate from its counterpart. Development and neutrality are incompatible, yet they are both necessary benefits of humanitarian action. Therefore, the strict approach and the integrated approach, while they compliment each other, must remain separate from one other in order to provide the widest range of benefits to those in need; which is *exactly* the point of humanitarian action.

## **Examples from the field**

I will now turn to two examples of how the IHAC operates on the ground, and how these two philosophies of humanitarianism can effectively compliment each other. First, we will examine Afghanistan and how the ongoing conflict affects the delivery of aid to those in need. Second, we will examine Haiti and how the scale of the disaster and number of actors has affected the humanitarian response. These examples were chosen to demonstrate the dichotomy of humanitarian action and how understanding the context of a situation is so vital to the effectiveness of aid delivery.

A couple days before I traveled to the MSF office in Geneva to interview one of that organization's employees, it was reported that cholera had been diagnosed in Haiti. Because I was well aware of MSF's criticisms (sometimes bordering on hostility) of the UN and the cluster system, I expected that my contact would take the opportunity to criticize the failure of the integrated approach in the capital of the small Caribbean state. Instead, to my surprise, he continually pointed to Afghanistan as an example of how the integrated approach fails. What was his main criticism of the UN in Afghanistan? Exactly what I have outlined above: the constraints that a development agenda – which is politicized – puts on humanitarian action.

Let me provide a brief background of the humanitarian context in Afghanistan. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is the operational body of the UN on the ground in Afghanistan. Its purpose is “to assist [the government] and the people of Afghanistan in laying the foundations for sustainable peace and development” [Mandate UNAMA, 2010]. UNAMA can be legitimately described as a supporter and working partner of the Karzai government, which is in conflict with the Taliban for control over the region. As an employee of the ICRC pointed out, “If you put all the parts of the UN together, it is hard for the person receiving aid to determine who is the humanitarian actor and who is the political actor” [ICRC Interview, 2010]. Therefore, the political actions of UNAMA are connected to other operations of the UN, including humanitarian assistance and the cluster system.

As my contact at MSF further explained, this has serious impacts on the ability of the IHAC to operate in the region:

“All the UN machine, and therefore all the humanitarian agencies of the UN plus all the NGOs who are trying to get the money from the UN, could be considered as a legitimate target for the Taliban. Which means that humanitarian assistance provided by those organizations cannot reach those who are under control of the Taliban or in insecure regions...We cannot discriminate among the good and bad victims. In reality it means that the UN cannot, nor will it ever be able to develop

assistance projects in territories controlled by the [Taliban]. And those that are suffering under the control of the Taliban deserve just as much to receive assistance as those under control of the UN or Karzai regime” [MSF Interview, 2010].

While the UN’s integrated approach cannot reach some people, organizations such as MSF and the ICRC have more freedom, “MSF can work in parts of Afghanistan where many American and UN NGOs cannot” [MSF Interview, 2010]. The UN and its partners play the politicized role of promoting development and democratization (which may be crucial for eliminating the need for future humanitarian assistance), the ICRC and MSF play the equally essential role of supplying humanitarian assistance to those in need in the present context.

This situation in Haiti is very different from that of Afghanistan. Logically, a natural disaster in the Western hemisphere is going to present different challenges than a political/ethnic/civil conflict in the Middle East. Such varying contexts in humanitarian action present major challenges to the humanitarian actors. As one member of the IHAC succinctly put it, “Trying to impose what worked in Afghanistan on the context in Haiti is bullshit” [MSF Interview, 2010]. In contrast to the importance of independence as a major factor in the ability to affectively distribute aid in Afghanistan, the most important factor in Haiti is coordination.

It is my opinion that the main reason that coordination is of particular importance in Haiti is because of a few compounding factors: the urban setting, the number of actors/scale of response, and the lack of any local structure. First, the earthquake completely devastated the ability of the local government to function, which necessitated that external management mechanisms fill the void. Second, the international response to the disaster was unprecedented; the amount of aid workers and supplies completely overwhelmed the capacity of the Port-au-Prince airport. Third, the relief effort was focused on a small yet densely populated area. One can only imagine the chaos of so many different NGOs (at one point there were over 400 in *just* the health cluster for example) attempting to operate in an urban setting with little to no infrastructure. As my contact at MSF summarized, “the places where coordination is most needed are the places where there are many actors in a very small part of the country” [MSF Interview, 2010].

In Haiti, the IHAC was presented with a situation that seems to be the perfect opportunity for coordination, and while Haiti was certainly not an example of perfect coordination being practiced (the main problem being the timeliness organizational implementation; specifically the



problems at the airport were brought up by each organization I interviewed), progress was made. “In Haiti, if you look at what the UN actually did,” an employee of the ICRC with ground experience in Haiti offered, “Yes, I think they came in quickly, they tried to organize quicker and they tried to organize more effectively” [ICRC Interview, 2010]. While the cluster system learns from experience and ironed-out some operational/procedural/ implementation-related semantics, the fact remains that the actors on the ground agree that coordination is exactly what a situation like Haiti needs.

Together, these two examples outline how varying contexts can best be addressed by both humanitarian philosophies. Despite their contrasting approach, both approaches have strengths that allow them to produce positive impacts that the other cannot (or, at least, to a lesser extent). Therefore, the two approaches are both complimentary and necessary. Without one, the overall ability of the IHAC to produce positive impacts on the ground to those in need would be reduced.

### **Doing No Harm**

Having established that both the strict and integrated approaches are not combinable yet independently complimentary, there is one more philosophical sticking point that separates these two approaches that must be addressed: using (most often withholding) humanitarian aid as a political tool. This very controversial issue is unique because it requires the consensus of the entire humanitarian community; the two approaches are not independently beneficial in this regard.

The points of view of the humanitarian actors in regard to this debate reflect their views on the importance of immediate recovery versus future development. For MSF, their opinion is predictable; as my contact at MSF put it, “where the humanitarian aid is used as a tool ... that is a problem” [MSF Interview, 2010]. The reason it is a problem for MSF is because ‘using’ humanitarian aid as a political tool often means withholding it from a population in order to put pressure on political leaders. As an example, the employee of MSF pointed to a situation in Angola where the UN asked MSF to stop a malnutrition project in order to put pressure on a political group involved in local conflict. MSF simply could not accept lives lost in the present to improve future possibilities.

In contrast to the MSF approach, the UN has (as exemplified above) used humanitarian aid as a political tool in some situations. Despite the above example (and those that will follow), the UN does not embrace the policy fully. “Aid being used as politics? No,” explained an employee of OCHA, “I would personally resist it very strongly” [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Despite this resistance, the UN also accepts that some tough situations require some tough choices to be made, “But I would also say,” the OCHA employee continued, “do no harm, think of the consequences, know what you are doing personally” [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Thus, the UN always approaches a humanitarian response with the following question in mind: will assistance do more harm than good in the long term?

One example of where the UN had to face this question head-on took place about ten years ago in Burundi. As my contact explained:

In Burundi, there was a huge debate in the early 2000s [because] the government had grouped the population into displacement camps [that had] no services what so ever, and then they said to the humanitarian community: “OK, now you provide the assistance to help these people.” One, there is a fundamental problem with the fact the government pursued this policy to begin with. [Second], there was the humanitarian imperative. If we don’t provide some assistance, the government isn’t going to or can only provide limited assistance. So if we don’t, we risk the lives of these people. What are we going to do? [OCHA Interview, 2010]

Such a situation exemplifies how the delivery of humanitarian aid can be incredibly complex. Clearly, the Burundi example identifies how the IHAC could be justified in withholding humanitarian aid in order to not ‘reward’ the injurious politics of a specific government.

The problem, however, is that if the UN were to decide to withhold assistance in a case such as Burundi, and MSF or the ICRC decided to implement some projects of their own, the potential political gains would be nullified and the humanitarian gains would be lessened due to decreased support. This is one example where all actors must be on the same page. In the Burundi example, “the humanitarian community came to the agreement that they would provide life-saving services only. So the community did provide assistance, but they did it while making formal statements to the government that this is the basis on which we are providing assistance, these are our concerns, and we are doing it for these reasons” [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Without a unified approach of every actor involved, the IHAC would not have been able to produce a policy that could accomplish political and humanitarian aims.

Finally, an example of how a disunited approach can backfire took place in the Ituri Province of Congo. In general, a population with needs in a region of conflict presented a complex situation for humanitarian actors. Specifically, despite concerns with the potential impact humanitarian intervention, “Organizations such as MSF or ICRC... even OXFAM said, ‘we are going to deliver to this population because these are the ones who are being attacked and they need the assistance.’ They did, and it resulted in an attack on those people and the humanitarian community needing to pull out of the area... and it took about 3 years to get back into the region” [OCHA Interview, 2010]. Therefore, Ituri is an example how humanitarian action *can* do harm.

How does the IHAC reconcile the fact that, “Your humanitarian imperative one-day can risk the next five years?” [OCHA Interview, 2010] There is no answer that will address every situation, so every context must be examined as what it is: a unique and specific situation. In order to address each context individually and in a unified matter, the IHAC must be able and willing to participate in a constructive dialogue. Whether or not MSF or the ICRC are official members of the cluster system or not (and, as this paper has shown, their separation from the integrated approach is very beneficial to those in need), those organizations *still* need to be able to work together and alongside each other. Most importantly, humanitarian organizations must be willing to accept a very difficult fact: that humanitarianism does not always produce positive outcomes. This fact must be better understood in order to improve the overall impact of humanitarianism.

## CONCLUSION

The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) distinctly sums up the paradox between the cluster system and the IHAC; “Diversity in the humanitarian sector is a strength,” a briefing from the GHP explains, “but it also makes collaborative action more difficult” [Egeland, 2006]. The cluster system is the UN’s response to this paradox. In effect, trying to marry diversity and coordination. However, the integrated approach of the UN has its limits, and does not include all actors, some of who prefer to remain outside the system and tout their uniqueness and separation from the UN. Consequently, the cluster system’s attempt at an integrated and unified approach to humanitarian aid is limited by the Dunantist humanitarian organizations that so fiercely guard their independence. I was confronted with the question: are the seemingly contradictory

approaches of the integrated cluster system and the strict humanitarians harmful to the overall delivery of humanitarian aid, or – at the very least – can they coexist?

The answer to that question includes, as does everything in the humanitarian field, shades of grey. Broadly speaking, there is certainly room for both approaches in humanitarian action, but I will go even further to suggest that the two approaches are complimentary and necessary counterparts. Possibly the best example of this is the limitations of the politicized approach of the cluster system that is balanced by the strict approach's flexibility. Performing development in tandem with early recovery limits the ability of the UN's cluster system to operate in some contexts. Yet, integrating development with early recovery may be completely justifiable and necessary in many situations. The independence of the Dunantist organizations that allows them to operate in areas where the UN is incapable relieves much of integrated approach's negative consequences at the field level. With both approaches, separate and independent of one another, the IHAC can address the needs of any range of contexts.

However, the two approaches cannot remain entirely separate from one another. There needs to remain constant and equal (that is to say that all sides must be willing to accept their counterparts as equally essential to the humanitarian cause) discussion and collaboration amongst all IHAC actors. This need for constant communication is learned from situations like Ituri where performing humanitarian action may do more harm than good. Constant discussion amongst IHAC actors is necessary because the contexts that humanitarian actors operate in are constantly evolving. Genuine and sincere discussion among all actors is the only way for the entire IHAC to respond effectively to evolving contexts. While strict humanitarianism and the integrated approach compliment each other, they remain part of a larger community and must be willing to have frank discussions on the possible negative impacts of their humanitarian projects.

All in all, the humanitarian community is expanding and evolving. With improved technology (specifically the internet) the ways that humanitarian actors choose to implement their programs have changed dramatically over the years. Where humanitarianism was once defined by religious groups performing basic health care, modern humanitarianism includes everything from the causes of need to the long-term impacts that aid can have on a community's development. Even actors such as MSF, who try to remain removed from development, coordinate with other organizations who focus on long-term programs in order to limit the impacts of voids left after the conclusion of emergency projects. Though the current mechanisms

– structured and informal – may not be perfect, a perfect system is not possible. What is positive is that as the IHAC learns, it also improves. “We are all searching on how can we build on what’s positive,” said an employee of OCHA speaking on clusters, “because there are a lot of positives. As someone who worked in the agency pre-coordination, I can tell you that this is a lot better” [OCHA Interview, 2010].

However important the improved mechanisms for coordination within the IHAC may be, the greatest strength of humanitarian organizations remains the people who inhabit their offices and implement their programs in the field. It is the commitment of those individuals to improve the world that creates the impetus to improve the effectiveness of humanitarianism and spurs innovative approaches to humanitarianism. Even though the current system may not be perfect, as long as people remain committed to humanitarianism, the IHAC will continue to evolve and improve.

This project was a great opportunity for me to learn about the politics of immediate recovery, development, and humanitarianism. More importantly, it gave me the extraordinary opportunity to talk, discuss, and engage with enthusiastic people at a variety of organizations dedicated to humanitarianism. Though their opinions may have differed on the politics of humanitarianism, they all shared in their devotion to those in need. That is what I will remember.

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**I, Andrew Patzke, certify that all of the writing in this Independent Study Project, in all honesty, is my own work, with the exception of those portions that are properly documented.**